



Town of Rowe
Board of Selectmen Minutes
Thursday February 18, 2021–5:00 p.m.
VIA TELECONFERENCE

Meetings normally held at the Municipal Offices are being held remotely, with adequate, alternative means of public access and, where required, public participation provided, in accordance with the Governor's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, M.G.L. c.30A § 20.

Board of Selectmen: Chair Charles Sokol, Selectman Ed Silva , Vice-Chair Joanne Semanie

Audience: Rowe Finance Committee: Chair Wayne Zavotka, Vice-Chair Loretta Dionne, Paul McLatchy III, Laurie Pike and C. Selmi Hyytinen (entered at 6:32pm)
Rowe School Committee: Chair Susan Zavotka, Mary Paige, Matt Crowningshield and Jen Macksey NBSU Business Manager, Principal Bill Knittle
Simon Zelago left the meeting at 5:45 p.m.

Call to Order: Chair Sokol called the meeting to order at 5:03 P.M.

Roll Call Vote: Chair Sokol- yes Selectman Silva – yes Vice-Chair Semanie- yes (Vote: 3-0-0)

Noteworthy Announcements (as needed): None

Announcement of recording devices: one

Ongoing Projects:

1. Personnel: Wage and Salary Chart
2. Personnel: Comp Time Policy
3. Personnel: Overtime Policy
4. Fire Dept: Follow up Discussion

Selectboard Business:

New Business:

1. Finance Committee Vacancy added to Annual Town Election:

Paul McLatchy III submitted a resignation letter from the Finance Committee effective 14, 2021. This advance notice would enable the position to be added to the annual election ballot.

MOTION TO ADD: Chair Sokol made a motion to add to the Municipal Election Ballot a Finance Committee seat vacated by Paul McLatchy III. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chair Semanie.

Roll Call Vote: Chair Sokol- yes Selectman Silva – yes Vice-Chair Semanie- yes (Vote: 3-0-0)

Old Business:

1. Follow-up on Planning Board Question:

Executive Secretary presented a draft letter to Greg Poehlein who submitted a special permit request to the Planning Board to be copied to the Planning Board Chair. A copy would also be sent to Paul Lemelin of Franklin County Cooperative Inspection Program as he had initiated a request the matter of no Planning Board response be investigated. Chair Sokol asked about what recourse could be taken should a committee member not perform their duties. Paul McLatchy III responding as Town Clerk said that Town Clerk could step in or citizens could recall members for failure and in the future change the bylaw so that cannot happen again.

MOTION TO SEND LETTER: Chair Sokol made a motion to send the letter to Greg Poehlein. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chair Semanie.

Roll Call Vote: Chair Sokol- yes Selectman Silva- yes Vice-Chair Semanie- yes (Vote: 3-0-0)

Contracts/Warrants:

1. Hilltown Demolition, LLC and the Town of Rowe for Park Kiosks:

A contract with Hilltown Demolition, LLC was reviewed by the Board which was approved by the Park Commission for Park Kiosks.

MOTION TO SIGN: Chair Sokol made a motion to sign the Agreement by and between Hilltown Demolition, LLC and the Town of Rowe, MA for \$16,497.46 for 13 kiosks delivered to the Park recently approved by the Park Commission. The motion was seconded by Selectman Silva.

Roll Call Vote: Chair Sokol- yes Selectman Silva- yes Vice-Chair Semanie- yes (Vote: 3-0-0)

Administrative Office Updates:

1. Executive Secretary Updates:

Janice Boudreau asked if Selectmen would appoint Robin Booth to the Cultural Council as requested in an email by the Cultural Council Chair BJ Roche.

MOTION TO APPOINT: Chair Sokol made a motion to appoint Robin Booth to the Rowe Cultural Council for a 3-year term. The motion was seconded by Vice-Chair Semanie.

Roll Call Vote: Chair Sokol- yes Selectman Silva- yes Vice-Chair Semanie- yes (Vote: 3-0-0)

2. Administrative Assistant Updates:

Paul McLatchy III said he was working on the paperwork associated with the Small Bridge Grant and a possible Green Community Grant for a Fire Station office area for mini split.

Other Business:

Senior Housing:

While waiting for the Finance Committee to join the meeting Selectman Silva said he would like to look into housing for the elderly for Rowe.

The Finance Committee joined the meeting at 6:00 p.m.

Appointments starting at 6:00 p.m.: Budget Hearings

School Budget: Chair Susan Zavotka was invited to make opening remarks regarding the school's budget. She indicated that the budget being presented tonight was still a first draft. Last year's school budget was cut by the Selectmen right before town meeting. They have been able to absorb those costs in the budget due to Covid, but the FY22 budget proposal reinstates the funds that were cut. Special Education and Northern Berkshire School Union (NBSU) costs have risen as well.

Business Manager Macksey presented the budget. She has been trying to change the format to better align with how other departments are presented- i.e. expenses on top with offset revenues on the bottom. She noted that most increases are due to contractual increases and new office space for the NBSU. Teachers are receiving roughly 1.75% COLA increases this year. The lines may be adjusted slightly as contract salary schedules are reviewed.

The \$1,000 travel stipend line for the principal has been moved into the principal's base salary line and is now pensionable. His salary represents a 3% increase. Ms. Pike asked why the increase was higher than the suggested 2.5% COLA other town employees are getting. Chair Susan Zavotka answered that this is to make it more in line with what the teachers will be getting (when combining step increases and COLA). Chair Sokol asked if this would be lowered if/when a new principal was hired, and the answer from Ms. Macksey was that it likely would be.

Chair Wayne Zavotka asked Ms. Macksey to describe the wages for teachers and how they operate. Ms. Macksey explained that the teachers have salary scales based on their level of education, and that there are five categories: Bachelors, Bachelors+15, Masters, Masters+15, and Masters+30. There are eighteen steps in total for each category. Each year a teacher receives a step increase and, under the current contract, a 1.75% COLA. Chair Sokol noted that the town is exploring a salary scale for its employees. Chair Susan Zavotka said that the salaries are based on comparisons with other towns, including those across the state. Mr. McLatchy urged the School Committee not to use numbers from the eastern part of the state when making comparisons as they are usually substantially higher than in this area. Chair Susan Zavotka answered that for the most part, most salaries used for a baseline were from Western Massachusetts.

A question was raised by Selectman Silva about why the school secretary was getting a 6% salary increase. Chair Susan Zavotka answered that the School Committee has been reviewing non-union employees and their wages to try and make them comparable with surrounding schools. Ms. Macksey also added that historically holiday pay was not included in salary lines and had to be accounted for, which this budget does represent.

The school is reviewing the Special Education department and seeing if current staff is adequate. Due to a student with an IEP, the school has had to hire an additional staff member.

Joining: Mr. Hyytinen joined the meeting at 6:32 PM.

School Budget, continued: The school is unsure of what external revenue there will be for Special Education. Chair Wayne Zavotka asked whether this position would be "flexible"- i.e. would it still be required if the student in question were to no longer be at the school. The answer was that it would be flexible. Ms. Pike reminded the School Committee that if the special needs child were a school choice

student, the sending town would be responsible for paying the extra costs. The administration acknowledged that this has been taken into consideration when preparing the budget.

The nurse's position was cut back last year to meet the cuts the Board of Selectmen made in the budget. However, this is being added back.

Transportation is being reviewed, and there may be an opportunity to cut back a significant amount of money if a van can be eliminated. However, this is not finalized yet.

The food services line has increased as the numbers for FY21 may have been "lowballed" and been adequately budgeted.

The fuel and electricity lines have been increased based on the average consumption over the last three years.

7-12 Budget: A lot of information is still up in the air due to tuition rates and transportation costs. However, there is not a lot that is controllable in this area of the budget, as they are fixed costs.

Departure: Mr. Hyytinen left/was disconnected at 6:48 PM.

Budget Format: Chair Sokol noted that it was very "refreshing" to see the new budget format, which represents the actual costs of the school, rather than just the net costs. This sentiment was shared by everyone else, and Ms. Macksey was commended for this new method of presentation.

Grants: Grant revenues are always an unknown. Ms. Macksey reported that she is hoping most of the standard grants will stay within reason. She usually budgets 90% to be safe. The school *did* receive a grant for \$85,000 from a Covid Relief program, which the school is looking to allocate over the next two years. The NBSU is also trying to apply for more grants as they can.

Return: Mr. Hyytinen rejoined the meeting at 6:52 PM.

School Choice: Members of all departments expressed concern about the level of funding being pulled from School Choice. The current budget proposal includes approximately \$300,000 out of School Choice. While members appreciate the school's efforts to reduce the tax burden, this is an unsustainable path as the school is paying out more than it is taking in in revenues.

Approximately \$241,250 was received through choice funds in FY21. As of June 30th, there was approximately \$284,000 in the revolving fund. The school is not bound by line item, and therefore is able to shift funds around as needed. As a result, in the past some School Committees have tried to build this fund by shifting funds from one line to another and lessening the amount spent out of school choice. Mr. McLatchy cited an example that one year the school returned less than \$1.00 to the town using this method. The current School Committee does not seem to follow this approach.

Ms. Macksey reported that the school choice is used to offset operating expenses at the elementary school, with a "cushion" to cover unexpected costs and for when teachers retire as they have payouts.

Members discussed what an appropriate amount of spending would be from the revolving fund. No one had a specific number in mind, but there seemed to be support for making it a sustainable number. Mr. McLatchy requested that the School Committee set a goal for what would be an adequate “cushion” each year, and then proposed that any revenue above and beyond that be spent to offset costs.

Timeline: Chair Wayne Zavotka pointed out that the budget has remained relatively flat-lined for the last five years but noted that it would need time to review. He inquired about the timeline for the town meeting, to which Executive Secretary Boudreau answered that it is still up in the air due to Covid. Last year the annual town meeting was held in June due to the pandemic, whereas it is typically held in May.

Stabilizing Budget: Chair Sokol offered an opinion that the school budget is complex as some costs are stable, but others are not. He asked for a list of costs that the school administration feels are more volatile/unpredictable, so that the town might be able to establish a baseline and work on ways to stabilize costs. Mr. McLatchy went so far as to suggest a stabilization fund for things like tuition that may increase or significantly decrease year to year.

Staff & Community: Chair Susan Zavotka asked members of the other departments to show their appreciation for school staff where possible. This has been a difficult year for everyone due to the pandemic, and any extra support they can get is always appreciated. Ms. Paige said that she is a mother of children who have gone through the school, and that she believes the education to be “exemplary”. Chair Wayne Zavotka also noted his support for the school and his gratitude for the number of school choice students that make it possible to have a school.

Minimum Required Contribution (MRC) & Tuition: Mr. McLatchy asked about Rowe’s annual MRC, which is an amount set by the state that towns are required to contribute to education. Depending on this number, he noted that it may not actually be much cheaper to send our students elsewhere, as is often suggested by those looking to lessen school spending. This number will need to be researched by NBSU staff. He also asked about the tuition agreement with Mohawk, which the town gave the School Committee authority to negotiate. Per Chair Susan Zavotka, the new tuition agreement reflects an average of assessments throughout the other towns and is comparable with what the town was paying before.

Departure: Members of the school administration were thanked for attending and left the meeting at 7:41 PM.

Town Hall Custodian: Ms. Pike asked about where the custodian’s request for a pay increase stood with the Board of Selectmen. This budget was originally submitted to the Finance Committee but referred to the Selectmen to finalize before review. Members of the Board briefly discussed it and voted to leave the budget at a 2.5% increase in pay. They may consider additional hours if needed and fund through the Cares Act if needed.

MOTION TO INCREASE SALARY: Following discussion, Chair Sokol made a motion to increase the Custodian salary by 2.5% as a Cost of Living Adjustment. The motion was seconded by Joanne Semanie.

Roll Call Vote: Chair Sokol- yes Selectman Silva – yes Vice-Chair Semanie- yes (Vote: 3-0-0)

Town Election/Resignation: Mr. McLatchy reported that he would be stepping down from the Finance Committee after the budget season due to what he described as “too many overlapping roles”. His resignation is effective the day before the election, so the position can still be added to the ballot. Mr. Hyytinen confirmed he is running for re-election. Ms. Pike has already taken out papers but not yet submitted, as she is considering matters in her personal life.

Police Training: A memo was received from Town Counsel regarding the new police reform law. It appears to suggest that training must be completed within three years, which is slightly different than what was reported at the budget hearing with the Police. The Police Chief indicated that training was on a rotating schedule based on last names. This memo will be reviewed in more detail to determine how the new law will affect police budgets.

Next Meeting: Now that budget hearings have concluded, the Finance Committee asked the Board of Selectmen about how involved they would like to be. While the Committee will continue the process regardless, they noted that they value the Board’s presence during meetings and would be happy to continue collaborating with them on the budget. As such, the two bodies agreed to meet every Tuesday in March at 6:00 PM. Meetings may be cancelled if business is finished, but members did not want to be scrambling to finalize the budget.

- Paul McLatchy III mentioned that employees need to realize that benefits are an added expense that must be considered
- breakdown of student ages to see population ebbs and flows

The School Committee, Bill Knittle and Jenn Macksey left the meeting 7:41 p.m.

Adjournment:

MOTION TO ADJOURN: Chair Sokol made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:03 p.m. The motion was seconded by Selectman Silva.

Roll Call Vote: Chair Sokol- yes Selectman Silva- yes Vice-Chair Semanie- yes (Vote: 3-0-0)

Respectfully Submitted,

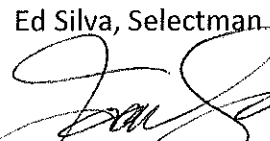
Janice Boudreau, Executive Secretary

Approval Date: *MARCH 4, 2021*

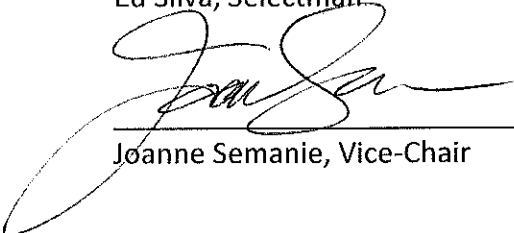
Approved:



Chuck Sokol, Chair



Ed Silva, Selectman



Joanne Semanie, Vice-Chair

Documents:

1. Agenda February 18, 2021
2. FY22 Budget Request- School Committee
3. Draft Letter to Poehlein
4. Memo from KP Law re: Police Reform Law
5. Resignation Letter from Paul McLatchy III